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ABSTRACT

The paper adds to the ongoing debate over whether education in multicultural societies should be provided in the native tongue of the children in the classrooms. Material is presented from two grassroots level village studies carried out in Senegal and Sri Lanka as a source of insiders' perceptions and desires. Comparative data from diverse countries are also used to attest to the complexity of the matter. Two issues are addressed: (1) language as a vehicle for social advancement and empowerment, from the bottom-up perspective; and (2) language as a means to promote national pride and unity, from the top-down perspective. It is concluded that there is a gap between what theorists proclaim as ideal and the real-life empirical world of schools in very poor multilingual countries. Contains 15 references. (LB)

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NATIONAL OR NATIVE LANGUAGE?

Options and Dilemmas Related to School Instruction Medium

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Introduction.

Although studies continue to show the advantages of educating children in their mother tongue - both for their later acquisition and transference of reading skills to other languages and for their total gain from educational input (e.g Unesco 1953; World Bank 1982; Danesi 1988) - the vernacular as medium of instruction still meets with resistance from many of the very participants who may profit by it. From remote African villages to Australian aboriginal communities, from South or Southeast Asian settings to the Peruvian Andes, examples can be found where the concept of empowerment - as perceived by hopeful parents - prevails over other considerations. At the same time, the notion of national unity through a single official language is defended by policymakers, who point out the many practical drawbacks involved in teaching in the vernacular in multilingual nations.

This paper adds to the ongoing examination of variables and the debate over whether education in multicultural societies should be provided in the native tongue of the children in the classrooms. The material from two grassroots-level village studies (carried out by the author: Senegal 1989; Sri Lanka 1984-85) is presented as a source of insiders' perceptions and desires. Additionally, comparative data from diverse countries around the world are brought in to attest to the complexity of the matter. The common thread of education as a vehicle to increased power is seen to be a uniting theme when the fears, wishes and hopes of the parents are listened to, while the theme of national unity is most often heard from the top down.

Case-study data to reflect on two countries' diverse courses.

> "You have to go to school in French. If you learn in Malinke or Peul, you're not educated."
>
> Malinke village father, 1989

A. Senegal.

Senegal is a country which had made a thorough copy of the French educational system by 1946 - its structure, content and diplomas - but early education in Senegal remained very elitist (Michel 1988:1066). The instruction medium has always been French; and the intention to remain with the French medium was officially underscored in 1971, although some experiments have been made in teaching the first two grades in Wolof [1] (Fal 1980:200-203).

Netteboulou, a remote village of the Malinke tribe (Mandinka, Mandingo, Mandingue) and the Muslim religion, located in the south-central part of Senegal, prides itself that it was one of the relatively few remote locations to receive a government school as early as 1933. The school presently has six grades and 186 pupils (131 boys, 55 girls). The six male teachers all come from other areas of the country and belong to ethnic groups with different native languages, none of them Malinke. They share a close camaraderie in French, isolated from the village in most respects.

The children enter first grade with no knowledge of French. They get little reinforcement from other classmates, because the students all share the same dilemma. High absenteeism due to the children's planting or harvesting chores or other farmwork obligations, aggravates the slow progress in language. Materials other than the blackboard and the tattered textbooks (often in short supply) are absent. The principal, who teaches the first two grades, admits that the process of teaching French in order that other class subjects can also be instructed, is tedious. Poor achievement by students after all six years of elementary school attests to the tedium: it is a very rare child who is able to pass the matriculation exam after 6th grade and continue on to study in high school.

The eleven best students from the 5th and 6th grades were asked to write a short essay on what they wanted for their future. While the content of the essays was touching and insightful of their communal culture (most desired a job in order to provide for their families), the low level of ability to express oneself in French, and the poor vocabulary and grammar, were indicative of the difficult task of instruction in a foreign language when little

reinforcement is available. It should also be noted that many of these participants had repeated grades and were much older than average 5th and 6th graders; for example, two were 14 and one was 15 years old.

The difficulty I had in getting a local interpreter in spite of the long-term presence of the school, was just one more indicator of the school's failure to teach the French language. The sprinkling of villagers who could converse fairly well in French were the old-timers who had worked as colonial employees, had served in the military, had worked sporadically in France as guest laborers, or those with considerable informal experience in business and commerce.

All of the parents in the sample of 32 (16 males, 16 females) were asked in an interview if they prefer the official[2] language (French) as medium of school instruction, or would they prefer another option: either Wolof, or instruction in the vernacular, Malinke. By far the largest number thought that education should be in French (26; 81%). Of these, 11 said spontaneously that once you have learned French, one's own maternal language would be easy to learn to read later. A few noted that Malinke was not a literate language and there should be no concern with teaching it in school. Some of the comments referred to the fact that French was the language of the wider world: "Malinke won't take you far;" or Malinke only concerns our little area, it's too narrow." A couple of others mentioned that the Senegalese were still in collaboration with the French and must therefore understand them. Surprisingly, only three made direct references to getting a job or that French was handy when one traveled.

There were three people who preferred the medium of instruction to be the children's mother tongue: 2 women and the male health worker of the village, the latter stating that learning French was an unrealistic expectation for the young children. One of the women stated that there were no jobs available for them, thus it was useless to learn French. Another 3 respondents, all women, said that both the official language and the native language were equally important. Two felt the school should start with French, and the other preferred the two languages be taught together. One male respondent noted that Arabic and French are equally important: "But while the returns for French come in this world, the returns for Arabic come after death." The village does have

a Koranic school, taught by a volunteer elder. Most village children attend (after the French school hours) long enough to learn to recite important Muslim prayers. Only a few boys persist in private lessons long enough to be literate in Arabic.

The six teachers, too, were each asked their views on the language of instruction. All but one preferred French, while admitting the difficulties it presented for teachers and learners. The one exception, himself of the Lebou tribe, stressed that it is better for the child's general education that instruction be be given in the mother tongue. The others noted that there were difficulties in the beginning, but learning French was better in the long run. One said that the different sounds and vowels would make it too hard to transcribe the diverse vernaculars and too difficult to switch from reading one to the other. Another pointed out the advantage of having a common language for national unity.

Today, with a literacy rate of 22.6% (males 31%, females 14.2% - 1980) and only 22% of those between 5-19 in school, one cannot say that the present system is functioning toward achieving its goals. There is tremendous waste through high dropout due to language incompetence. French remains the language of the elite, and the masses partake but sparingly of its fruits while clinging to a dream of equality. However, keeping the road to empowerment open by insisting on education in the official language is not surprising in a country where opportunities for bettering one's life are minimal. At the same time, the failure to meet the needs of the masses by offering them a more realistic vehicle for learning is keeping the populous in the dark. Paradoxically, the participants see learning French first as the logical order in eventually becoming educated in their mother tongue, rather the reverse order, which may better serve the educational needs of the children and more effectively foster bilingualism.

B. Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka exemplifies a country which took an entirely different course before 1931. Under the British rule in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) there was a dual

educational system: English-medium, fee-levying schools for the elite, who received a good quality education; and vernacular-medium schools for the masses, which led to low-level employment and few options for high education (Baker 1986:40). The reforms of 1931, among other things, eventually led to the overthrow of English as medium of instruction. By 1953-1958 there was a gradual grade-by-grade phase-out of English. In the Sinhala (about 75%) and the Tamil (about 25%) vernacular schools, English was supposedly introduced as a compulsory subject for students above grade 3. Then, as now, offering English was a kind of deception, for many schools never had an English teacher or at best an underqualified one. Knowing English continued to be important for good jobs or further study. And it was still the child from the relatively prosperous home who was in a position to gain a good knowledge of English (Baker 1986:50). De Lanerolle sharply criticized the developments around the English language in schools and its role in maintaining class distinctions:

> Since the 1940s all that successive governments have done for English is to profess an interest in it, to provide the semblance of it to the masses and to retain its unique gifts themselves. While today English remains a badge of class distinction, regrettably it is also a highly refined weapon in the armoury of our ruling elites (De Lanerolle 1981:38).

When I went to do research in the remote southeastern village of Suduwatura Ara in 1984, there was no English teacher. My volunteering to teach the school class for the 3rd-5th grade children and a nonformal class in the weekends for all interested adults in the area, was met with enthusiasm. Part of the enthusiasm was due to the curiosity of having a white woman in their schoolhouse, gesticulating, pantomiming, and leading in songs and exercises to get the meaning of words and phrases across to the students. As for the adult classes, the curiosity wore off, and in the end only about six adult and high school students, mostly those from neighboring villages, persisted for a year with their lessons. Although the practical use of English in a remote Sri Lankan rural setting was virtually nihil, at a certain point a few villagers confided to me their regret at not having learned the language. Namely, the British-run Pelwatte Sugar Company was expanded some 30 km. south of the village, offering relatively high-paid jobs to a large number of agricultural group supervisors. The latter, however, were required to have some speaking and writing knowledge of English (Baker 1986:116).

Representatives of all 43 village households were interviewed at length on a wide variety of topics, including whether they think English is important, and why. With the exception of 4 respondents, all said they thought it was important to learn English. The reasons given, however, were not always convincing. For example, 17 (40%) said it was important in order to be able to talk with foreigners (like me), and 12 (28%) stated they couldn't really say why it was important. Only 7 (16%) said it would give them job opportunities, and 3 said it raised one's status and gave access to books and knowledge. On balance it would seem that the functional benefits of English are far removed from the real world of the villagers.

This is not the case in the urban centers, where knowing English is a decided advantage in government and business. The students I taught in the M.A. program in sociology at the University of Colombo, had difficulty with their English, because their schooling had been in the vernacular. Writing papers and reading scientific articles were extremely labor-intensive endeavors due to the students' relatively poor background in English. Those from elite families that spoke English in the home and who sent their children to private schools were at a definite advantage.

Senegal and Sri Lanka, when juxtaposed, form an interesting comparison with respect to their attitudes toward language instruction medium. The former still grasps the language of colonial domination, arguing that it will provide more opportunity and equality. The latter chose for the vernacular long ago to rid itself of the inequalities brought on by colonial domination - only to find, after the country's achieving a high literacy rate (86.1%) and school enrollment (84% of 5-14 year-olds), that the exclusiveness of English-language education has helped foster a smaller and more powerful core of advantaged elite. Some feel that the duality of having either Sinhala or Tamil medium schools has helped enhance the devastating civil strife and rivalry in Sri Lanka today. Both Senegal and Sri Lanka remain among the poorest countries in the world.

Two issues from studies of instruction medium in other countries.

A. Language as a vehicle for social advancement and empowerment - from the bottom-up perspectivs.

In Peru, as in Senegal, Sri Lanka and other developing countries, free education is seen as a way to escape a situation of dominance or exploitation (Hornberger 1980:146). The Quechua language of Peru is associated with oppression. In the Peruvian areas studied by Hornberger, language instruction has traditionally been in Spanish; the children arrive at school speaking only Quechua, are sent at great expense and sacrifice by the parents, and still the dropout and illiteracy rates remain high (Hornberger 1980:148). The community members regard school as a means for their children to learn Spanish (1980:153) and penetrate into the non-ayllu domain - the larger, national, Peruvian society, while the ayllu or traditional domain is the one associated with their native Quechua language (1980:151). As long as the primary reward systems of the larger society do not promote use of Quechua (e.g. no one now is given job preference for knowing Quechua or both Spanish and Quechua), then the Quechua speakers will want to maintain the school as a Spanish element in the community - even though learning Quechua first will help them learn Spanish (Hornberger 1980:155-156). This is the same line of thinking found in the Senegal villages.

It is interesting to note a similar situation where language was associated with particular sociocultural domains. Ralph Folds analyzed the introduction of a bilingual program in the central Australian Pitjantjatjara communities, which had no regard for the socio-linguistic domains associated with Aboriginal and "whitefella" business. Here the bilingual program was a failure, for it represented a "paternalistic, imposed attempt to preserve indigenous culture" (Folds 1989:44). The Pitjantjatjara experiment degraded the vernacular by using corrupted versions of it and allowing teachers incompetent in that language to teach it. The Aboriginal communities consistently expressed strong feelings about the need for their children to learn English, to be educated in English - while competency in English is better realized after a foundation of literacy in the indigenous language (Folds 1989:48). Folds concludes that bilingual models need to be judged by their potential to empower Aboriginal communities in their present circumstances (1989:49). As the Pitjantjara community did not

perceive the bilingual model offered to be useful for them, or even for being a way to perserve their identity and dignity, the experiment was a failure.

The above examples from Peru and Australia ilustrate that speakers of the non-dominant language, although they may consciously want to maintain their language and cultural identity, are sensitive to their languages being taught outside their perceived appropriate domain. This presents an anomaly and gives the suspicion that their narrow path toward empowerment might be cut off. As in Senegal, they are even willing to reject education in their native tongue as a curiosity and deny that their language is a literate one.

While diverse studies continue to show that formal training in the mother tongue is an important factor in the development of general language proficiency and successful, functional literacy, this concept may be hard to sell in countries where literacy in the native tongue has very limited use in the modern economy, or in instances where the alphabet of the two languages is greatly different. The success of the Foyer Project in Belgium points strongly toward the need for formal mother-tongue training, confirming Cummins' "interdependence principle" that native language literacy is a prerequisite for global language proficiency (Danesi 1988:439). Danesi emphasizes the devotion of the teachers involved in the Foyer Project, their commitment to the educational achievement of the children and their support of mother-tongue training in the curriculum (1988:452). Such dedicated teachers will undoubtedly be hard to find in many minority-language locales, where native speakers themselves were handicapped by the dominant society and less able to pursue an education to become a teacher.

B. Language as a means to promote national pride and unity - from the top-down perspective.

Many examples from the literature can be found where a compromise solution has been sought. Although linguistic pluralism in contemporary nation states is the norm rather than the exception, the tendency seems to be to encourage more integration so that distinct groups do not become increasingly different and unintelligible (Bray 1984:65).

In Nigeria, for example, the need for compromise as well as the need for national unity can be clearly seen. In the colonial era the primary pupils learned in the vernacular the first few years before changing to English; then after independence English was introduced right from Class I. This policy was changed back in the the mid-70s, when English was taught as a subject in the first grades but was the medium of instruction in Class IV (Bray 1984:240). Many practical problems remain. Tuition cannot be provided in all of Nigeria's 395 languages, and which one to use in multilingual areas remains a question. Some children are forced to learn in a "foreign language" in their first school years and change to another one (English) later on (Bray 1984:240). The author adds the fact that "prograss up the educational ladder is still dependent on a good command of English," and children in those schools and states where English is taught from the beginning have an advantage over others (Bray 1984:240).

This same kind of situation is underscored in another paper on the Yoruba in Nigeria. In private schools, usually found in the cities and patronized by more affluent members of society, English is used as the medium of instruction from the start. Parents believe this gives their children an extra advantage in competing for admission to secondary school (Taiwo 1980:81). Thus here again we see a focus by the elite on the language associated with power and dominance, and they are willing to pay for the advantage.

A study of five West African countries showed diverse models, none without problems. On the extreme side of integration of national languages as medium of instruction we find Guinee, whose cultural socialist revolution required instruction in primary as well as secondary schools to be given in its eight national languages. A myriad of problems was encountered (including those of diverse phonetics and alphabets, books, and getting qualified teachers); and there was much resistance given by intellectuals (Doualamou 1981:187-190). The conclusion of Fal's study mentioned that education in the native tongue will only be seen as successful if it leads to practical and positive ends: reading newspapers and books that are made available, and securing gainful employment (Fal 1981:205) - thus the theme of empowerment again creeps in the picture. Examples can be found in other multilingual corners of the world. Brock points out for the Caribbean (1984:161) that language is a cultural index of great

significance for education. In general, creole and patois, the native languages, are encouraged by socialist administrations, while conservative regimes prefer to maintain English as instruction medium. The professional middle classes discourage their children from using non-standard English or patois (Brock 1984:161). Brock maintains that the choice of first and second languages in the schools will be made on political grounds (Brock 1984:186), additional evidence of the top-down decision process.

Finally, interesting comparative material is found in Southeast Asia, where a broad collection of multicultural and multilingual societies exists, and where all the governments have been deliberate in their desire to use their education systems to foster a sense of national unity in their populations (Watson 1984: 216). Watson presents a survery of Indonesia, Thailand, Peninsular Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore, with different combinations of major languages and national languages, and diverse language policies in education. For example, Indonesia, with 3 major languages and Bahasa Indonesia as national language, uses the vernacular until grade 3 and thereafter the national language, while putting forth a policy of assimilation (Watson 1984:215). The author points out that educational policies differ considerably according to the position perceived by the real dominant elite (1984:231). It is also concluded that the use of a national language to create a sense of national identity can have quite different outcomes. In Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, national language policies have been largely successful; in Singapore, the national language was bypassed for educational purposes. English, the language of science and commerce, was taken as the educational language (Watson 1984: 231). For all, it was necessary to tread the sensitive balance between different ethnic groups in their respective countries (Watson 1984:231). Thus not only national unity, but also economic incentives were the motivating factors for decisions regarding language instruction.

Conclusions.

This paper emphasizes - through fieldwork data and a literature survey - that there are no easy answers. A colossal gap exists between what the theorists proclaim as ideal, and the real-life empirical world of schools in very poor

multilingual countries. That is to say, the ideal of teaching in the mother tongue in order to enhance global language proficiency, must take into account that there are many practical problems to be dealt with and many sources of resistance. The practical problems can be readily enumerated: those of alphabet, transcriptions, phonetics, paucity of vocabulary, lack of resources for programs and trained teachers, and shortage of textbooks and other printed matter in the new-literate languages.

While such practical problems are not to be scoffed at, more important are the sources of resistance at different levels. The governmental levels may fear isolation and decreasing national unity if native tongues are reinforced on a literate level. The participants, as seen in the Senegalese village, do not want to see their small access route to the language of power and commercial success, become even narrower. To have literacy in the native tongue be judged as useful, the appropriate reading material, inside and outside the school, must be available, and the economic advantages must be apparent. This is a big order and a slow process. But so was the move from Latin as the literate language in the 16th century to widespread use of the diverse vernaculars. Each country will suffer its growing pains in choosing among the many imperfect models with regard to instruction medium in multilingual nations.

NOTES

1. Wolof is spoken by more than half the population and considered a sort of lingua franca in Senegal.

2. Some confusion exists in the literature regarding the terms 'national' and 'official' language. Many West African nations use 'official' language to refer to the language of the ex-colonial mother countries, e.g. French or English, the language used officially by the government; while 'national' language refers to the vernacular or native language (mother tongue, maternal language, etc.). In the literature on Southeast Asian countries, 'national' language refers to the language used by the government (Bahasa Indonesia, Bahasa Malaysia, Thai, Tagalog, etc.); these are not necessarily major spoken languages in the country, nor do they necessarily have anything to do with the ex-colonial mother countries.

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